



AASW
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Senator the Hon Ian Macdonald
Senator for Queensland
PO Box 2185
Townsville, QLD, 4810
Email: senator.ian.macdonald@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator,

Drastic reductions to support for people seeking asylum

We are writing as we are concerned that the Federal Department of Home Affairs plans to drastically reduce supports for people seeking asylum under the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program. These changes mean many people will no longer have access to these life-saving supports and will result in thousands of highly vulnerable people becoming homeless and destitute. We would like your support in order to reverse these recent policy changes.

The Australian Association of Social Workers is the key professional body representing more than 10,000 social workers throughout Australia. Over 2,100 of these members are based in Queensland. Social work is founded on the principles of social justice, human rights and professional integrity. It aims to enhance the quality of life and support the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society through practise that is ethically accountable, professionally competent and transparent. The social work profession's values are embodied in the profession's national and international Codes of Ethics, Practice Standards and the theoretical perspectives that underpin Social Work's professional knowledge and evidence base.

A looming crisis

From 18 June 2018, people on SRSS who have the right to work and do not meet a high threshold of vulnerability will be exited from the program, losing all financial support. This will happen even if they are unemployed, and they will not be given further assistance to become employed. Currently, people on bridging visas can only get support under Stream A of the Jobactive program, which mainly provides access to a computer and the Internet. There are over 13,000 people on the program, and it is estimated that these changes could mean at least half of these people may lose support.

We hear from our members who are social workers working in organisations supporting asylum seekers that they are already overwhelmed by the number of people who come to them for assistance. The assistance includes, but is not limited to casework, food parcels, clothing, vouchers and public transport subsidies, and supporting women who have experienced violence. Our members along with other community and human services people are helping people to barely scrape by as people are truly living in the margins of society.

The number of people eligible for support has already reduced dramatically since August 2017, when changes were made to the SRSS program without consulting either service providers or peak bodies. These changes have removed people from SRSS who are studying full-time, have transferred more than \$1000 between bank accounts over a 12-month period, and who came by plane and have a valid visa (such as a student visa).

These changes will affect pregnant women who fled domestic violence but whose partner visa is still in effect, as they will be ineligible, and also parents with young children who transferred money in Australia or overseas will not be able to access or remain on this program. We have also heard of bright students who won scholarships to attend universities and are now losing their income support.

Why people still need SRSS

SRSS is designed to be made available for the shortest practicable time to help people "resolve their immigration status". It is our understanding that most of those on the SRSS program are still waiting for the government to make a decision on their refugee claims. They have been waiting for years to get the right to work, the right to apply for protection, and now continue to wait to have their claims assessed. Many people will continue to wait until 2020 to have their initial claims processed, as indicated by the Department of Home Affairs. Few of them can consider returning to their home country. These people are doing everything they can to resolve their status, but the current system is delaying them from "resolving their status".

A significant number of people currently in the SRSS program are likely to be refugees who will remain in Australia for years to come. It defies sense and our obligations under the UN Conventions to force people into destitution at a time of great vulnerability, particularly when many are likely to become long-term residents of Australia.

Why they will struggle to find work

Supporting people seeking asylum to find sustainable employment is a goal that we share. Steady employment helps people to support themselves and can also improve their emotional, psychological and physical well-being and that of their families. It allows people to become part of our society. However, the new criteria for SRSS eligibility only asks if people are extremely vulnerable. Anyone that does not meet these very high thresholds will be expected to find work, without the necessary support. There is clearly a very big difference between able to work physically, and being able to get work.

We believe that many people who will lose access to SRSS will struggle to find adequate employment. People seeking asylum already face significant barriers. They have been barred from working for many years, have been given minimal support to learn English or to learn new skills, do not have a secure visa status, and lack local Australian work experience. We know already that not having a secure or permanent visa is a huge barrier for people seeking employment, which places this group of individuals in a highly vulnerable and impossible position.

Finding employment will be even more difficult without a basic income. People on SRSS already get 89% of Newstart, or less than \$35 a day. People cannot be expected to pay for the costs of looking for work, such as transport and childcare, when they cannot afford the basic necessities.

Why these policies will cost the Government more

Making people destitute at a vulnerable time is likely to lead to a crisis. In the short term, removing people from income support will lead to higher costs to governments and the community, as the effects will be borne by hospitals, police, mental health, community services and emergency services. In the longer term, there will be flow-on effects for the health of refugees and their children.

Return to a fair-minded approach

Reversing these changes is entirely within your Government's discretion. We already have seen the negative impacts of the previous detrimental policies. Further punitive and ill-advised changes will have devastating consequences for people seeking asylum, the voluntary sector and the broader Australian community.

We ask for your support in urging the Federal Department of Home Affairs to consider reversing these changes and make the SRSS program accessible to all people seeking asylum.

Thank you for your support.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fotina Hardy', written in a cursive style.

Fotina Hardy

Queensland Branch President